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# **Soviet Naval Strategy and Programs Toward the 21st Century**

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*March 1990/S*

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Soviet Naval Strategy and Programs Toward the 21st Century

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--Gorbachev is expected to cut spending on the Navy.  
These cuts will produce significant changes in Navy  
procurement and force structure, but not in missions  
or strategy.

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--The Soviet Navy's emphasis on strategic strike and  
the defeat of enemy naval forces will continue.

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--Integration of naval, land, and air forces into  
combined-arms operations under the concept of the  
Theater Strategic Operation will improve.

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--The Soviets will actively pursue naval arms control  
in an effort to erode the US maritime advantage,  
conserve resources, and achieve some political and  
propaganda benefit.

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### Key Judgments

The Navy's role in Soviet military strategy will not change substantially in the context of the Gorbachev revolution. The Navy will suffer cutbacks in defense spending, but radical changes in its missions or a major erosion of its combat capabilities are not expected over the next decade. Since the mid-1980s Soviet Navy has improved its war-fighting capabilities and has assumed greater responsibilities in unified Soviet military strategy, especially an enhanced role in strategic strike operations and in national air defense, and a more integrated role for its general purpose forces in theater warfare and in defense of the homeland.

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The Soviet Navy, unlike the Ground Forces, confronts the era of "reasonable sufficiency" from a position of inferiority vis-a-vis the West. Although it is too early to estimate with any precision the Soviet Navy's share of defense cuts, the Navy could try to absorb its share through: continuation of reduced operating tempo and cuts in personnel, accelerated retirement and scrapping of older ships and submarines, program cuts or slowdowns, and various arms control initiatives.

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Nevertheless, substantial improvements are under way in surface ships, submarines, and naval aviation. Although the Navy will have fewer ships and submarines by the turn of the century than it has today, the newer units will be more capable:

- Submarines will continue to enjoy top priority, including innovative improvements in nonnuclear units.
- Soviet Naval Aviation will remain largely a land-based force, but supersonic fighters will be carrier capable.
- Surface forces will acquire larger carriers and improved cruisers and destroyers.

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Soviet general purpose naval forces have recently acquired a significantly increased role in combined-arms operations within the context of the Theater Strategic Operation. This operation will involve forces from all combat arms.

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Available evidence suggests that the Soviets have two plans for the Theater Strategic Operation: a Strategic Offensive Operation and a Strategic Defensive Operation. The Strategic Defensive Operation is probably the basis for current Soviet strategy in the Atlantic and Pacific. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] longer periods of conventional warfare, the Soviets continue to prepare for nuclear war. It is judged, however, that they would probably not use nuclear weapons at sea before they were used on land. [REDACTED]

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Improvements in the Soviet ballistic missile submarine force, particularly in terms of survivability, responsiveness, and accuracy of sea-launched ballistic missiles, give the Soviet leadership greater flexibility in employing ballistic missile submarines and a greater capability in using these submarines to conduct nuclear strikes against a broader range of targets. [REDACTED]

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Soviet nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles are primarily theater strike weapons. It is unlikely that the Soviets would conduct anything other than aperiodic patrols by submarines armed with these cruise missiles off the coasts of the United States. [REDACTED]

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Although the Soviets consider countering Western ballistic missile submarines their top naval priority, it is estimated that the Soviets' ability to detect and attack such submarines in the open ocean is virtually nonexistent and will remain so through the 1990s. Acquiring this capability will remain a major Soviet goal, but it probably will not be achieved during this century. [REDACTED]

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Significant cuts in Soviet naval construction programs probably will not have a dramatic effect on the Navy's capabilities over the next 10 years and the mix of Soviet naval forces will stay about the same. The heart of the

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Navy's combat forces in the year 2000 are already operational or in series production. Once constructed, these forces usually remain in active service for 20 to 30 years.

[REDACTED]

The Soviets will actively pursue naval arms control in an effort to erode the US maritime advantage, including limitations on long-range cruise missiles. [REDACTED]

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Even if a START agreement led to a major reduction in the number of Soviet ballistic missile submarines, it is believed that few, if any, general purpose naval forces--including nuclear attack submarines--would be freed from protecting their own ballistic missile submarines to pursue other tasks. This is because the Soviets' protection of their missile submarines is based on command of the sea in geographic areas. Only a dramatic reduction in the Soviet perception of the Western threat from the maritime approaches would enable Soviet naval and air units to shift from protecting the approaches to the USSR to other assignments. [REDACTED]

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Even with fewer general purpose naval units, the basic mission of the Soviet Navy would not change. It still would be required to protect the USSR against the Western threat from the sea. Only radical changes, such as decisions to eliminate the Navy's role in strategic strike against the United States, its responsibilities for national air defense, or its support for operations on land, could produce a fundamental change in strategy. But such decisions are highly unlikely. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets have somewhat improved their ability to project power, but the purpose of Soviet naval deployments in the Third World is not, and never has been, to project power against significant opposition. The Navy is not configured for combat operations beyond the cover of land-based aircraft; it lacks adequate antisubmarine warfare, air defense, sea-based tactical air support, and naval amphibious lift to sustain such operations. It will continue to be deficient in these roles, and ongoing naval programs clearly indicate that the Soviets are not seeking to acquire this type of power projection capability. [REDACTED]

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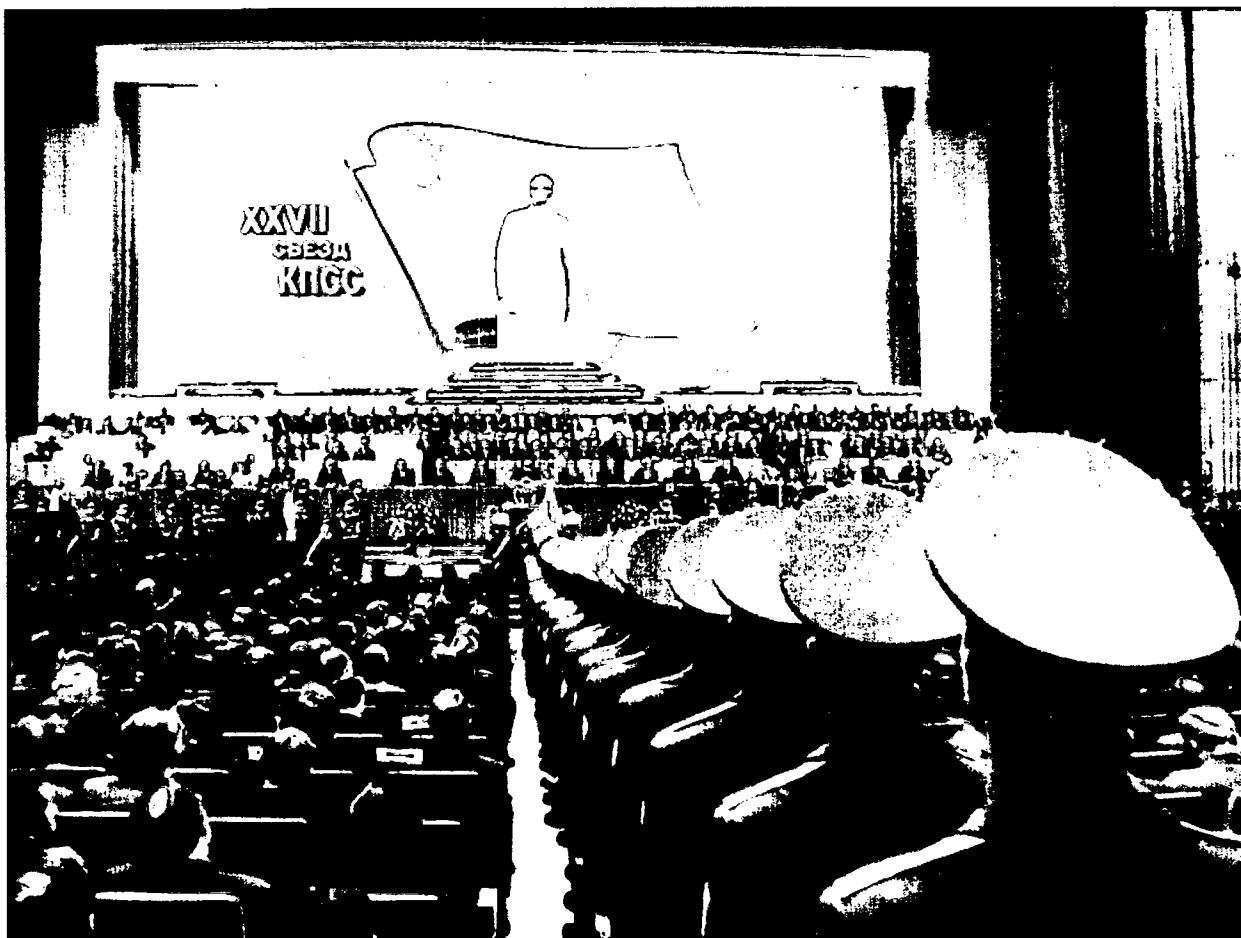
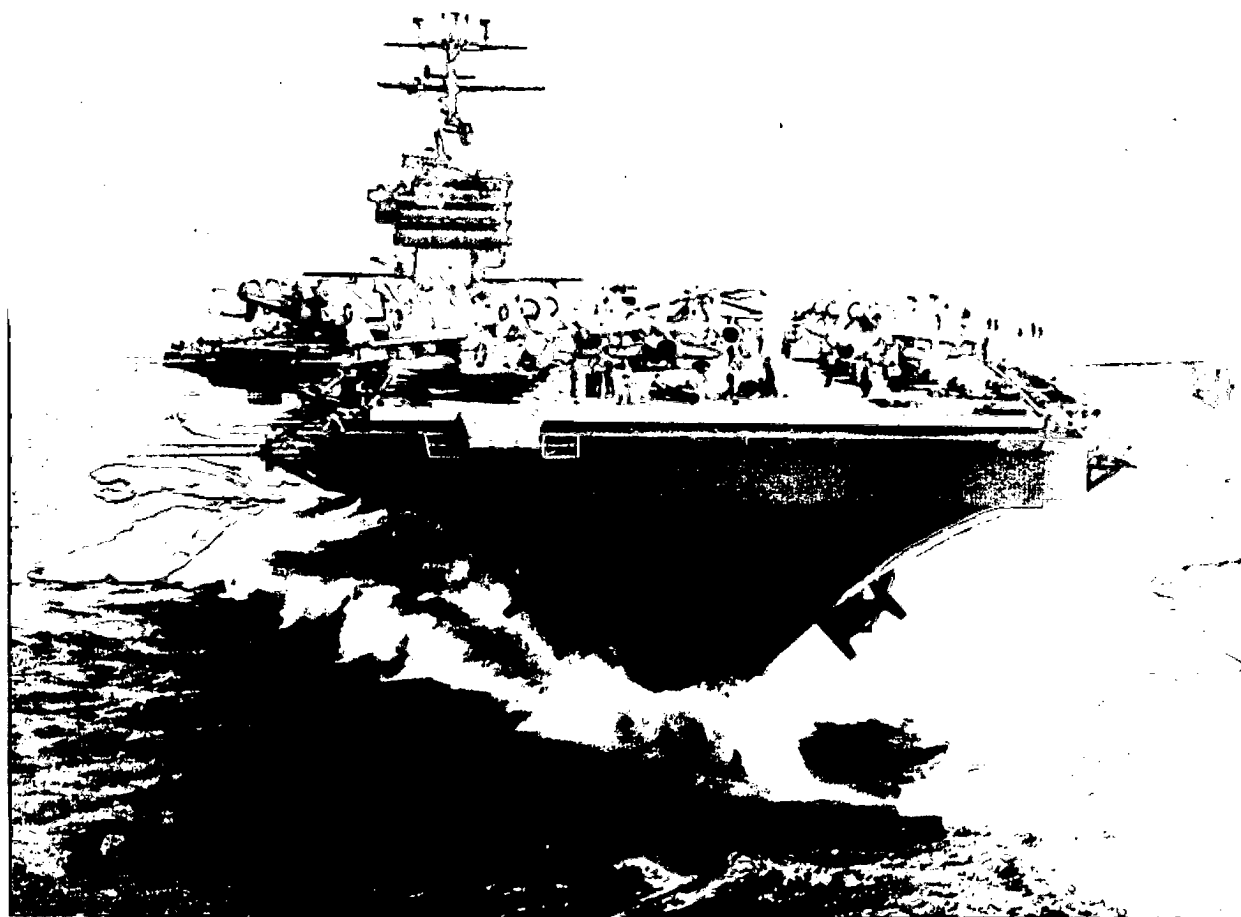


Figure 1. General Secretary Gorbachev addresses the 27th Party Congress, February 1986. ☐

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**Figure 2**  
**The Soviet View of the US Maritime Threat**



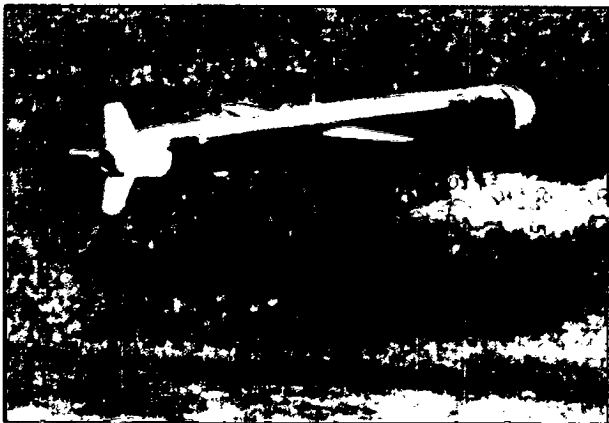
*Aircraft carrier* ☐

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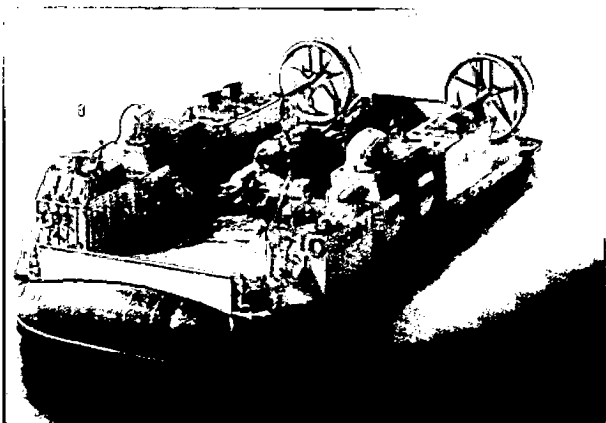
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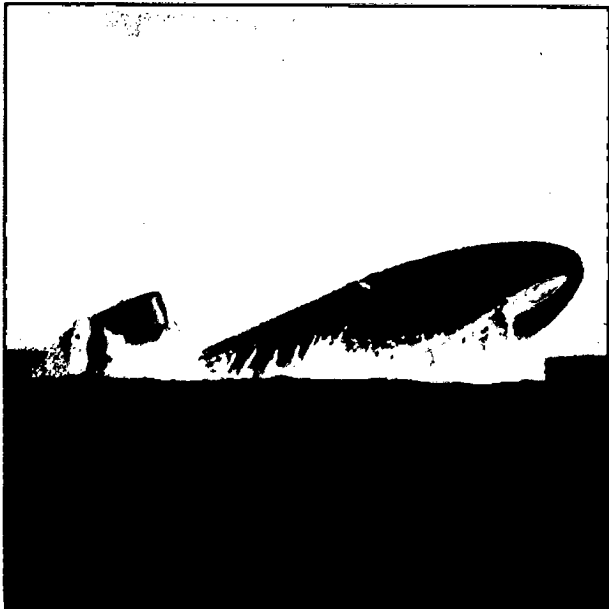


Tomahawk cruise missile

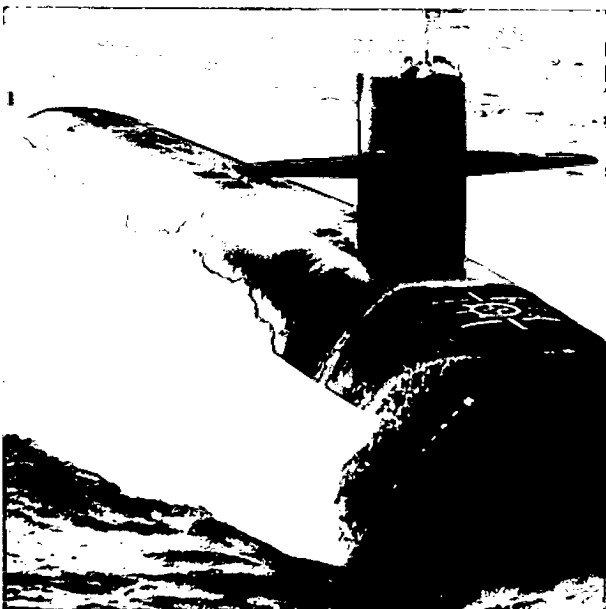


Landing craft air cushion

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Attack submarine

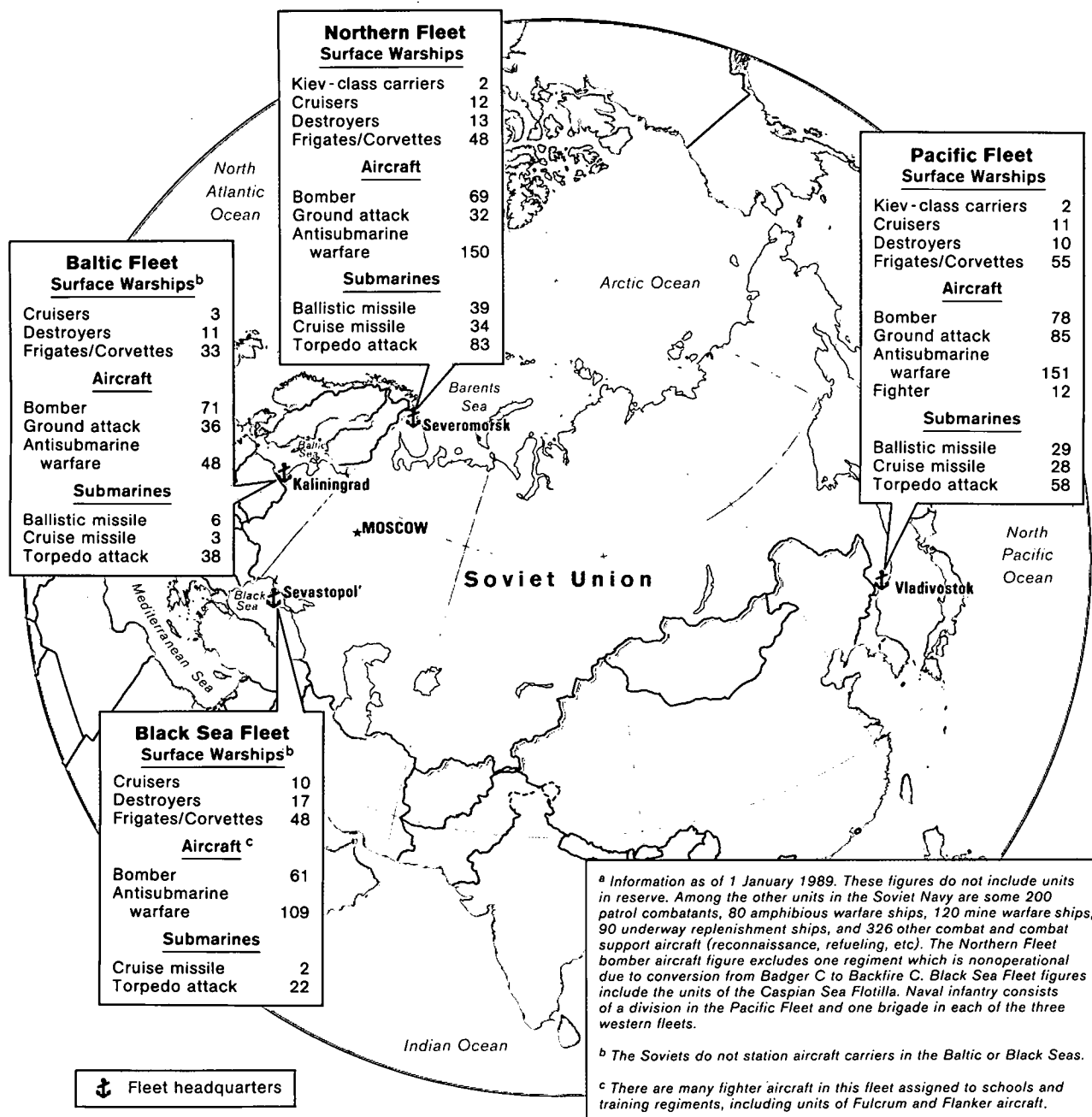


Trident ballistic missile submarine

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**Figure 4**  
**Active Major Soviet Naval Forces<sup>a</sup>**



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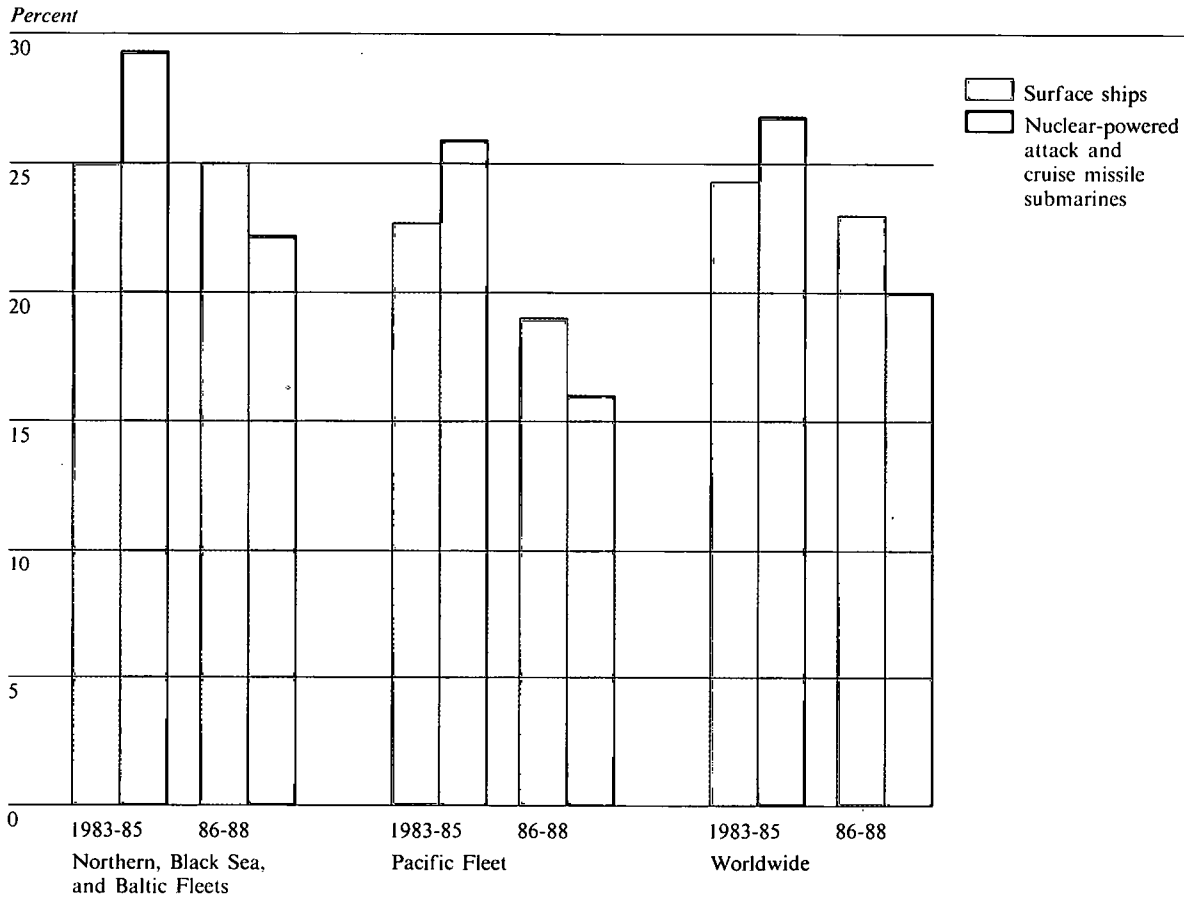
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**Figure 6**  
**Soviet Navy General Purpose Forces**  
**Operating Tempo, 1983-88**



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**Figure 16 (continued)**



*Akula SSN* ☐

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*Victor-III SSN* ☐

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*Sierra SSN* ☐

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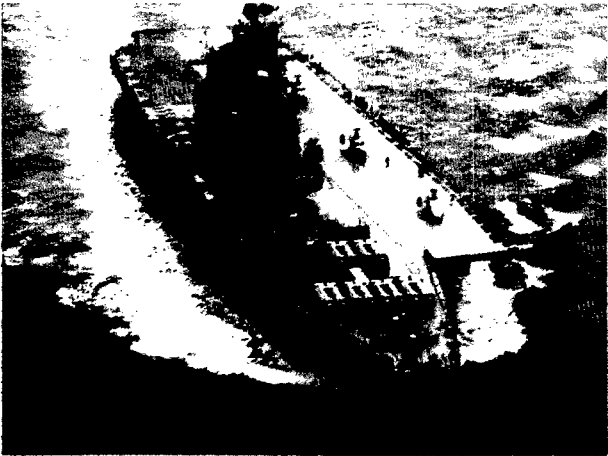
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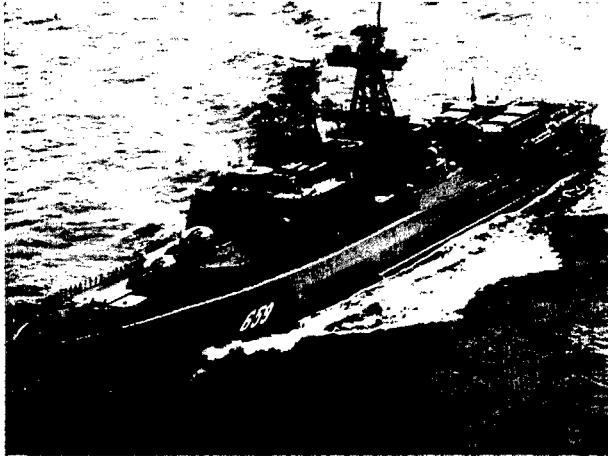


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Figure 19  
Modern Soviet Surface Warships

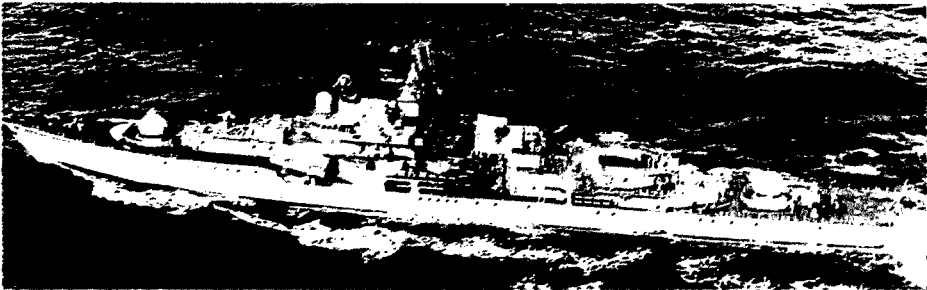


Kiev CVHG (guided-missile helicopter carrier)



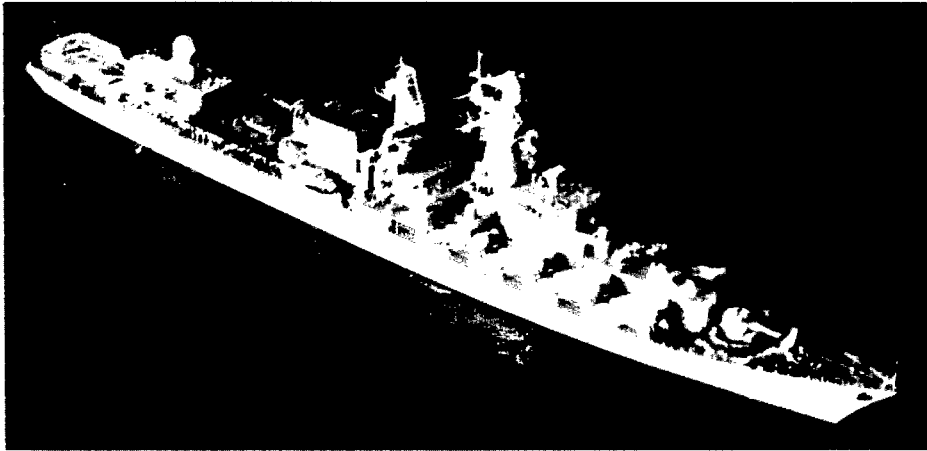
Udaloy DDG (guided-missile destroyer)

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Sovremennyy DDG

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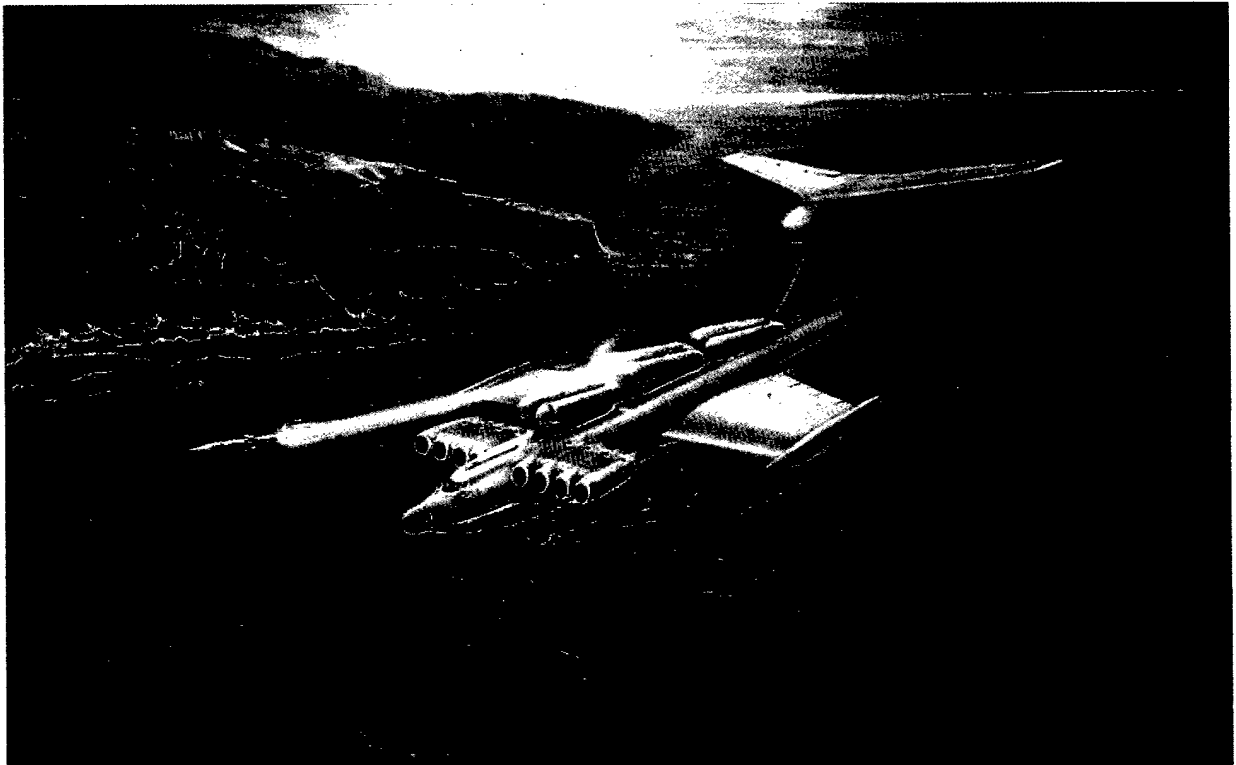


Slava CG (guided-missile cruiser)

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*Figure 20. Artist conception of an Utkha-class wing-in-ground (WIG) effect vehicle firing a missile.*

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*Figure 22. Gorbachev's policy of perestroika is the most important factor determining the future of the Soviet military.*

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